MY FICTION,
OUR REALITY
A DANGANRONPA V3 POSTGAME ZINE
DIGITAL BONUS

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FÜR KAEDE

by ToxicPineapple

Kaede wakes from the simulation gasping.

Her fingernails dig into her trachea. It takes a couple staff members to pull her back together, their urgent reassurances that *it wasn't real, it was all a simulation, you're alive now, you're okay,* falling on deaf ears. She doesn't have time, between seeing her friends again and being rushed to a hospital room, to process what they tell her along the way; that *everything* was fake, that all their memories were fabricated, that they aren't who they think they are.

When she's finally alone, hooked up to machines and wearing a blue hospital gown, Kaede's eyelids flutter. Her hands are impossibly heavy. She flexes the fingers of one and stares at it, taking in the blood caked underneath her fingernails and the pale bones protruding from her knuckles before dropping it to the bed.

She's too exhausted to think about any of it, to do much more than struggle weakly to wrap her head around the fact that she's still alive, so she stops trying. She closes her eyes and turns her head into the pillow, the corners of her eyes stinging.

As she is alone—as there is nobody here to see her cry—Kaede allows the tears to streak down her face, and eventually she falls asleep, listening to the steady beeping from the heart monitor at her bedside.

In the weeks that follow, Kaede allows the doctors to reintroduce her to solid food. She allows the physical therapists to teach her to walk again, though a part of her wants to pull away from their touch. She asks to see her friends, and they tell her that she'll be able to in time—but for now, she needs to focus on her rehabilitation. They say when participants have rushed the recovery process, it has left them permanently immobile, or even dead. Kaede isn't afraid of death so much anymore, but she's scared enough of *dying* that she keeps her mouth shut.

Better to just go along with it, better not to make trouble. After all, if what they're saying is to be believed, Kaede agreed to all of this, didn't she? Akamatsu Kaede, the Ultimate Pianist, was never a real person—Akamatsu Kaede isn't even her real name. It stands to reason, therefore, that the person who woke up from the simulation has no real need to fight. She's here by choice, they remind her, everything that happened to her was consensual.

Kaede has a hard time believing it, especially when she wakes up before the sun, sobbing and screaming, clawing at the bandages around her throat like she'll find all the answers she needs once she's unraveled them, but what other answer is there? What reason do they have to lie? Her cooperation means nothing to them, not *hers*. Akamatsu Kaede's cooperation would have had meaning, but Kaede *herself* is barely a person, just somebody who sleeps and wakes and yearns to play the piano, something that she's not even sure that she knows how to do anymore.

That thought, whenever it surfaces—and it surfaces more than she'd like—always causes a chill to run through her, her stomach and throat clenching at the very notion that she might not know how to do it. But now isn't the time to be thinking about that. Now, her physical therapists say, is the time to rest. So rest she does. Eventually, she will find out, one way or the other, whether or not she can still play. (Whether or not she could ever play.) But that question is decidedly *future* Kaede's problem.

After being released from her hospital room, Kaede climbs onto a bus with the other fifteen *Danganronpa* participants. A thousand eyes settle on her, on the bandages around her neck, and her skin crawls and prickles under the attention. Kaede has struggled to breathe since she awoke, but now she feels like she's suffocating. Her hands clench and unclench at her sides, itching for ivory keys that she's not sure she's ever touched before.

Kokichi, seated at the back of the bus, catches her eye. Kaede doesn't know what compels her to look up, but when she does, she finds his gaze, and one of his eyebrows quirks. He's sitting alone, several seats away from anybody else. Kaede assumes this is by choice—Kokichi was annoying, but well-intentioned, or so Kaede had gathered while she was alive—but after a beat of eye contact, he jerks his chin, and violet eyes settle on the empty seat beside him. Kaede's limbs move on their own. She avoids eye contact with Shuichi, with Kaito, with anybody who turns back to stare at her, for as long as the bus moves.

The sixteen of them are to live together in a large house for a year after the game. There are kitchen staff, janitors, and therapists, a fact which seems to irritate Kirumi, but the executive that leads the way through the ostentatious foyer assures them that the staff will remain out of sight until they're needed.

None of that ends up mattering to Kaede. The executive turns to her with a twinkle in his eye, a cold, large hand resting on her shoulder.

"There's a piano upstairs," he whispers.

There is a squirming sensation in Kaede's stomach. He leaves without saying goodbye.

The piano upstairs is marvelous. Deep mahogany shines under the ceiling lights, the ebony and white keys glistening. It's well-

maintained—or at least, Kaede thinks so, but she can't tell, doesn't know whether this is an assumption or fact. The lump that rises in her throat is nearly powerful enough to make her swivel on her heel, but instead, she approaches it.

Kaede can hardly breathe as she extends her hands, fingertips hovering against the cool, untouched keys. There is the ghost of sensation beneath her skin, an implicit touch, the promise of what she's about to feel, and it's so... utterly familiar, the corner of Kaede's eyes warm, and all she can hear is *Der Flohwalzer*, every discordant note sending shivers down her spine, and...

The door closes behind her with a muted click, a sound so gentle it's lost behind the buzzing in her ears. Kaede's heart is loud and heavy and painful. She can barely feel anything.

She decides to revisit the piano tomorrow.

What if I can't play it? Kaede thinks, staring down at the keys.

It has been two weeks and three days since their arrival at this house. They have settled into a routine of sorts where they meet twice a day in the dining hall for breakfast and dinner, but things are different now. Uncomfortable. Kaede can't bring herself to ask what she missed, and the majority of her friends don't seem all that keen on divulging. She can't say she blames them. If Rantaro asked—and he won't ask—about her execution, how it felt to swing back and forth every time she was jerked in the air by her neck, she wouldn't know what to say. She would probably hit him upside the head. Again.

(He would probably find that funny if she told him she thought it.)

Kaede has visited the room with the piano every morning since settling in. Every morning she has entered, walking swiftly to the

instrument and seating herself, and every morning she has extended her fingers, waiting with baited breath for the moment she would finally learn.

It would make sense if I couldn't play it. I was never an Ultimate Pianist. Even if I can play it, I probably won't be as good as I remember. I should just try right now and rip the bandaid off.

It's a lot easier to think than do. Kaede manages to bring her hands down on the keys, but the second before she makes contact, her hands ball into fists, and an ugly chord leaves the piano. Kaede sucks in a sharp breath, her eyes screwing shut, and straightens her spine. The door creaks open behind her, and Ryoma's low voice mumbles an inquiry.

He's probably worried. Kaede can't really tell.

"I'm fine, Hoshi-kun," she says without turning around. "You know how it is, right?"

Ryoma doesn't say anything. He must *know how it is*, though, because when Kaede turns around, he's gone, the door left ajar in his wake.

Shuichi asks her if she'd like to teach him how to play.

"What?"

The question comes out of Kaede before she can even properly register Shuichi's own. She blinks, her stomach twisting, and for a moment is split between screaming at him and bursting into sobs. Shuichi meets her eyes, as he does so easily nowadays, and tilts his head to the side.

"Well, it... was something that we talked about, wasn't it? Playing the piano together. And, ah, you said that you wanted to play that

piece for me, *Clair De Lune*." Shuichi smiles. "I know you've been spending every morning in the piano room, so I thought maybe..."

What Shuichi thought, Kaede doesn't really care to hear. She stands, abruptly, before he can speak again, and clears her throat. She doesn't know what she's going to say, only that she has to leave.

"Bye, Saihara-kun."

Eloquent as ever, Kaede. She can feel his hurt gaze on her back all the way up to the upstairs bathroom, where she falls over the toilet and dry heaves.

The piano room, like Kaede's lab, has files of piano music lining the walls. Two mornings after she leaves Shuichi, she browses through them, scanning name after name, forcing herself not to look at the scores, her stomach clenching every time she gets as far down as a key signature. She might not be able to read it. It would make sense if she couldn't read it. The idea that she doesn't know how to read it makes Kaede want to tear her hair out.

Kaede pulls a file too hard and the box falls to the ground, scattering sheet music across the carpet. A thick huff escapes her and she kicks the box, pain flaring in her toe. As Kaede hisses, tears stinging at her eyes, the doors open again.

She turns her head, gearing up to yell at whoever it is to leave, and then stops short when she sees that it's Kokichi.

He's done an exemplary job of making himself scarce since coming here; even during communal mealtimes, Kaede has barely seen him. She catches occasional glimpses—Kokichi rushing down the hall, Kokichi poking Kaito in the side, Kokichi sneaking into the kitchen—but they're never anything more than that, and Kaede wouldn't want to bother him. She still hasn't asked what happened during the killing game, but she's gotten the feeling from Shuichi

and Miu and almost everybody else that whatever it was Kokichi did after she died, it was nasty.

Still, that's the furthest thing from Kaede's mind as Kokichi steps into the room, his expression blank. His eyes go from the spilled sheet music to Kaede, holding her foot and nearly in tears by the shelf, and then he smiles.

"I heard Akamatsu-chan was self-isolating, but I didn't think she was taking it out on the tree corpses." He bends down and picks up a sheet of paper, a tiny frown twitching onto his face. "Haven't they been through enough?"

Kaede sniffles. "I'm sorry," she says. She isn't sure whether she's apologising to the trees, or to Kokichi, who shouldn't have to see her this way. "I-I didn't—I mean, I'm not trying to self-isolate, I just—"

Kokichi cuts her off by raising his hands. "If I came after you for self-isolating, I'd be a big ol' hypocrite." He crumples the paper into a ball in his fist and kicks it to the side. "Besides, I hate trees."

Hands tucked behind his neck, Kokichi strolls over to the piano and plops himself down on the bench. Before Kaede can ask what he's doing, he begins to play. His eyes are closed, but he plays elegantly, his fingers dancing over the keys like he's done it all his life.

The lump in Kaede's throat thickens painfully. She closes her eyes, but she can still hear the music flowing from the instrument she misses so dearly. Could she do that...? If she sat down beside him, could she make a similar sound, or would she just... freeze?

"Did Akamatsu-chan play the piano before the game?" Kokichi asks. There's no emotion in his voice. Kaede can't decide if it's comforting or not.

"I don't know," Kaede whispers.

The music stops. Kaede doesn't open her eyes. She listens, but Kokichi doesn't move—or at least, he doesn't move loud enough for

Kaede to hear. Eventually, the floor creaks in front of her, and Kaede opens her eyes to see Kokichi standing barely an inch away from her face.

"Do you *wanna* know?"

Kaede wants to say *No*. She wants to say *It doesn't matter whether I know how to play or not, I'm still not the person everyone thinks I am*. She wants to say *Why do you even care? You hated me before I died, didn't you? Haven't you been avoiding everyone since you woke up?*

When Kaede opens her mouth, what comes out is a question.

"What if the answer is no?"

Gently, carefully, Kokichi takes one of her hands and tugs her in the direction of the piano. Kaede moves, more out of obligation than anything, and allows Kokichi to sit her down. He scoops up the sheet that he crumpled before and smooths it out, propping it up in front of her.

Für Elise. Of course, what else would it be?

"Then I'll teach you," Kokichi says finally. One of his hands rests on top of hers. It's small, and cooler than hers is, and while Kokichi pauses, Kaede stares at it, tears pooling in her eyes. "But you gotta at least *try* first."

She has so many questions—how he realised he knew how to play, why he came, why he cares in the first place—but Kaede doesn't think her voice would work, doesn't know if she'd want to ask if it would.

Her heart is beating hard and heavy and a freezing sensation spreads through her; from her fingertips to the pit of her stomach to her inner thighs. The lump in her throat is so thick that if Kaede opened her mouth she doesn't think she could breathe around it. There's a part of her that doesn't want to know at all.

But if she doesn't try now, then she'll never know what she needs to learn, right?

Kaede gives Kokichi another uncertain look. When their eyes meet, he squeezes her hand and pulls away. He doesn't speak, but Kaede knows what he's saying.

Try.

So she takes a breath, and she does.

a promise to keep twice, three times over

by LavenderLilys

At night, Himiko bundled under her sheets, glued to her bedside window. That night it was snowing in indecisive patterns of mist and sleet, chaotic and captivating–and she almost missed it. A clink of ceramic in the kitchen brought her eyes back into focus, and in the dim light of the street lamps, she made out little clumps of snow.

She fisted a sheet to her nose in anticipation. The best days were days of rain, snow, or birds–they liked to gather in her mom's small garden and pluck her tomato plants down to the stem.

She would have lazed all night except–

Shuichi Saihara [10:27 AM]:
It's about Keebo.

You can't go out like that! Her mother scolded, wrapped her in a scarf that itched her nose and went up to her ears, fussing all while her father fetched her winter boots from the closet. *Changed your mind?* He asked as he swaddled her in his thickest coat.

Shuichi's mansion sits in its own world, far from the streets of the city. It looms with the full height of three stories–with a basement–a thick sheet of snow draping over the roof. The rubber underfoot of her boots squeaks on the marble steps in no great hurry. The snowfall had lightened to a frosty mist that ices the damaged tips of her hair at her waist and collects in the frizz. Unlike her mom's, their greenery is more than barren branches and beak-bitten leaves. Branches of their winterberry holly are dusted with snow, the witch hazel on the precipice of bending under their burden.

Icicles hang over the porch like teeth. She steps into the mouth of the porch when the door cracks open.

Maki steps out, the door held open for her. "Sorry," she says, because Himiko had nearly jumped out of her coat.

"E-Eh, no, sorry I'm late," she says.

Maki shakes her head and steps aside.

It's warm. And messy. On her only visit, Shuichi had yet to fill the expansive mansion his actually-famous parents bought for him. Now, it has the opposite problem. Papers, boxes, files, and photos clutter around as though it's a storage house. All surfaces balance stacks of mail. The only exception, the worn wooden cabinets and large display case on the far wall, are free of paper.

In the display are dozens of framed photos, lined up into each other or in strips of film hanging down. Shuichi never seemed close to his family, but her confusion splinters as she ghosts farther in.

A boy proudly holds up a bug he caught. A blonde girl takes a selfie. A sports team gathers on the court. A girl graduates middle school. A boy waves in front of a leaning tower. A young girl with short brown hair wears a gi, practices a high kick in sync with her classmates. A girl with sleet blonde hair and dark brown skin, smeared with clay, holds up an intricate pot.

Head heavy on her neck, it's difficult to take them all in. Her hands are too warm, she presses them against the cool wood, strangely misses the crisp air outside.

"Things their families sent that might help with the investigation," Maki says. She touches the wiry, interlocking golden frame of a group of girls, huddled together and smiling at the camera. The hollowness in Himiko's chest caves in. "Or things they wanted to share, I suppose."

She flinches away from those eyes, and avoids the worried pair of red that follow her.

She sheds her coat before thinking about it, and stands awkwardly when there's nowhere for it. Maki grabs it and tosses it onto a loveseat as she leads her into the living room. Eyes pierce Himiko's back the whole way.

The living room is clean by comparison, but lived in. It's homely–or at least gives the illusion of it.

"Shuichi will be down soon, he had to take a call," Maki says, then shakes her head. "And that idiot ran off somewhere, but he'll be back."

Her hair is shorter than Himiko last saw in person. She knows from photos online she had cut her hair short a while back. It has since grown to reach midway down her back in a high ponytail. Maki's ends are as healthy as the rest of it, thick and straight.

The ice in her hair has melted enough that when she smooths over the frizz, it stays down. The cold water against her hand is pleasant. In the backyard, visible through large windows, it doesn't appear to be snowing at all.

She presses her palm against the window, cold as ice, a fog halo bleeds around it–she really is too warm. "Can I go out?"

Maki's eyes widen in surprise, but she unlatches the door that cracks open as if it were frozen shut.

She was wrong, it is still snowing, but she won't complain. She rubs her hands over each other, too warm, then too cold.

"I told him he should move it. It looks like some kind of obsessive shrine, and in the front room too," Maki sighs. "He put it all up there because that's where it gathered. The front room turned into the mailroom within a month. We get a lot of mail," she smiles, "as I'm sure you noticed." It slides off as she looks out over the yard. "He doesn't want to throw any of it away. Or leave it shut away in some box."

"No, it's nice," she says. "I was just, I haven't, eh," she wraps her arms around herself, sorely missing her father's coat. "It's just been a long time for me. That's all. I was surprised, but I'm better now." She tucks her hands into her sleeves. "It was nice to see them like that," she admits.

Maki nods, and seems like she's going to leave it at that before she cuts a little smile. "Still, he should move it someplace else, right?"

"Eh, probably," she says, voice dipping as noise comes from the side of the house–the house far from any neighbors. Maki sighs, put-out instead of worried, but Himiko soon recognizes the voices that approach the fence.

"--make them go through it again!"

"So unfair! I'm doing nothing of the sort!"

"Yes you are! Your family is worried–"

"--*His* family–"

"Oh shut it! You know that's bullshit! *Your* family is worried sick!"

"Yeah, yeah. Hup!" A fluffy head of hair pops over the fence. He kicks a leg over the side before his gaze pins her to the porch. "Oh hey, she's back," he says, and drops down in a billow of snow.

Himiko had not expected to see him tonight. Or ever again. From the way they tell it, he was home for one day and then gone in the night.

She squirmed. "H-Hi. Glad you're... alive."

He beams, undeterred. "Thanks! I try my best to stay alive every day!"

"Oh, hey!" Kaito greets when his head pops over the fence. He scales it with all the grace of a horse. "Good to see you! Glad you could make it!" He jogs up to the porch.

"Hey, glad you're better."

He grins, fist thumping against his chest. "Better than ever! As if it never even happened! Crazy, right?"

Oma puffs an icy breath out of the corner of his mouth. "Such a hypocrite..."

"You can come through the front like a normal person, you know," Maki says.

"Huh? So I'm a normal person to you now? How dare you! I'll have to come in from the sky next time!"

"Nevermind," she sighs.

"It's fuckin freezing out here!" Kaito rubs his hands together, jogging up the steps. "Let's go in already." He whirls on Himiko. "Oh yeah! Himiko, we have the sickest game room. You haven't seen it yet, right? Aw man, Makiroll, did you already show her?"

Maki glances at Himiko. "No. We were–"

A gust of wind kicks up snow as if it were powder.

"Whoa," Oma says to something behind her, pausing on the steps.

"Hey, watch out," Kaito says, grips her arm, and pulls her into his chest in a spin. An especially thick cloud of misty snow smacks into his back. When it settles, she catches the culprit as the wind knocks a smaller cloud of snow off the roof.

"Let's get you inside," Kaito says with a pat on her shoulder.

"She's the one that wanted to come out," Maki says.

"Dressed like this?!"

"Give her your clothes then!" Oma says.

"What? Don't order me around!"

"Tch! You give me no choice." Oma clutches the top of his coat as if to remove it. Instead he pulls something out, points it at Kaito. It's too dark, until a metallic glint catches the light from indoors. "You've disobeyed me for the last time! I hope you're prepared to accept your punishment!"

"Put that shit away! You're freaking her out!"

"If you were one of my subordinates, I would never let you freeze to death like this selfish animal," he croons to her with a sympathetic frown.

"Give it a fucking rest, I was going to anyways." His hands unlatch the topmost button at his collar.

Himiko eyes Maki, surprised she doesn't move at all while Oma points a knife at Kaito. Maki instead follows something in the house.

It's only because she had not completely adjusted to the dark that she wasn't completely blinded by the intense light that sharply lit up the porch.

When her eyes adjust, she feels like she's in another world. Snowflakes glitter around her, light catching on specks as small as dust–so many more than she imagined. Against the dark back of the night, she has never seen snowfall in such contrasted clarity. She had thought it was barely mist, but now, it comes down thick in gossamer threads. They catch the light like sparks, like shooting stars–like magic.

"Waahhhh, Saihara-chan blinded us! Now he'll strike in our defenseless state! Maki-chan, protect me!" Himiko is jostled by the force of him latching onto Maki's side. Her glare is frigid.

"Ah, sorry," Shuichi says, sliding the door closed. "I saw you all back here, I thought I'd turn on the light." His clothes are dark and businesslike, a pair of glasses on his nose and hair tucked behind one ear. He looks true to the polished detective he's become. *It should be good for something*, he had said, when she wondered why he would keep anything those people gave them.

He wasn't alone. Maki joined him to work with investigators to track the true masterminds. They've uncovered a lot over the years– or so she hears– but Himiko doesn't keep up with it. She knows there have been other killing games. And the only survivors, out of all of them, are present in this backyard. She didn't care to know any more.

"Hey man, what's going on with Keebo?" Kaito asks. His mouth pressed in a line, he drapes his jacket over Himiko's shoulders. She clutches it close.

Shuichi and Maki share a glance. His face is grave, and Himiko resigns herself to the worst. "As you know, Idabashi has been rebuilding him but," he tugs his coat closer to himself in a slight breeze, "they couldn't recover much of his memory units, and what they did recover was too badly damaged. The Keebo we knew can't be recovered." Snow whips into his icy face, the rustle of the wind the only sound.

Clumps fall onto the ground, lost in the sheet of icy white. Some dissolve on the wood that touches the edge of the house.

"Damn it. Damn it!" Kaito says, pacing the porch, snow in as much of a whipped up frenzie as he is.

"They brought it to Idabashi?" Himiko asks quietly.

"Of course," Shuichi says.

"I bet they didn't find it all. There's probably a huge chunk out there that they missed!" Kaito says.

"Would you give it a rest? None of that will change anything," Maki sighs.

"I'm going back out there myself."

Maki's eyes flash. "No, you're not."

"Like hell I'm not! He's still out there! Shit, it's been years! If we don't get him soon he'll get all damaged or something."

"More damaged than blowing into a thousand little pieces?" Oma noses in.

"Dude," he slams his fist into the wall, shattering ice crystals like glass, "not the FUCKING time." Oma pouts, mutters *whatever*. "There's no way those freaks are still there, the cops searched the place top to bottom!"

"Do you hear yourself?" Maki asks. "They searched every inch of that place. They found every bit of him that wasn't incinerated. Even Idabashi can't fix what's left. It's over."

The dull ache in the hollow of Himiko's chest flares.

"You said the doc rebuilt him?" Oma asks.

"He's working on it, yes," Shuichi says. "It's extremely complicated machinery, so it will take a few more years."

The crunching of ice fades as Kaito comes to a stop. He drags a hand down his face with a sigh. He turns around, jaw ridgid. "Then, we'll have to be sure to give him the welcome of a lifetime when he's done," he says.

"He'll be a stranger," Oma points out.

"So?" Maki says. "We all were. Twice over even."

"Hmph, three times over for some of us."

"It won't be the same but, it'll be Keebo. And the Keebo we knew would love to have friends." Shuichi smiles. "We can be his first ones. And we'll be his friend as many times over as we need to be. At least, that's how I feel."

"Ha! Couldn't have said it better myself!" Kaito says.

Himiko's eyes slide over to Shuichi, the determination in his eyes is achingly familiar. A corner of her mouth twitches up. "Hey, have you gotten even cooler?"

Shuichi starts, fumbling. He glances to Maki for support, to which she offers nothing but an amused smile.

"Careful, Momota-chan, you're falling way behind!" Oma calls over.

"I know that already," Kaito sighs.

Shuichi gapes. "No, that's not-!"

He waves him off. "Nah, you don't gotta say it. I've been slacking all these years. Letting my assistants do all the work. It's embarrassing. But not anymore!" He pumps his fists.

"Kaito, you were *recovering*!" Shuichi says urgently.

"That's no excuse! From now on, I'm joining your team full time!"

"Hey!" Oma calls, waving his knife around. "The punishment for deserters is death by acupuncture!"

"Just leave it. An idiot will always be an idiot," Maki sighs to Shuichi.

"That's true," Himiko says over Kaito's indignant squawk. When he rounds on her in betrayal, she can't help but laugh.

"It's coming down pretty hard. Would you like to spend the night?" Shuichi asks her.

"Are you sure?" Himiko asks.

"Of course, everyone else is."

"Makiroll practically lives here," Kaito says as he flops over the couch. "We all have rooms, including you, if ya want."

Her hands are slow to shed the glacial cold they'd craved minutes before in her lap. "If that's alright," she says thickly.

"Wohooo! Sleep overrrr!" Oma cheers. "Yumeno-chan wouldn't know it, but I host the best sleepovers."

Himiko eyes him warily.

"Don't worry, he stays with me," Kaito says. She redirects it to him. "Wh-What?! I have to keep an eye on him!"

"Oh? Who's keeping an eye on who now?"

"Sh-shut up!" Kaito fists the pillow in his hand.

"Momota-chan's just scared to sleep in a big, scary, *haunted* house by himself!"

"Th-That's not fucking true!" he screams, chucking it at Oma's head, who twists away. "And it's not fucking haunted!"

"Momota-chan!" he tsks, "we really need to work on this lying habit of yours."

Maki's nails dig into the couch. "Kaito," she warns.

"I'm fucking trying!"

"I'll show you to your room," Shuichi offers her.

She stands to take him up on it but–she should really call her parents. "Sorry. They still worry so much," she explains.

"Take all the time you need."

She pulls out her phone in the front room, but the eyes on her back make her fingers shake on the dial pad. Pocketing the phone–her mother will know immediately if she's upset–she walks over to the framed photos in the display.

Her eyes drag over to the one encased in a wired gold frame, heavy with guilt.

She's maybe a few years younger than the older teen Himiko knew, perched on a bench in a white sundress. Her arms circle two friends to her sides, and her pink eyes impart love and excitement.

Himiko can't breathe, her chest heavy as stone. The wood chills her flushed forehead.

I'm sorry. I broke our promise. I didn't just make it to you, I made it to everyone. And I haven't been keeping it at all. I'm so sorry.

This house is suffocatingly warm, the one where her friends spend the night often, grow closer together–and farther from her. Where they keep a room for someone who would rather curl into a ball and forget about the world than return their calls. Shuichi could have texted her about Keebo like the strangers they've become, but he invited her into their house like a friend.

Tears puddle in front of the frame by the time she collects the strength to lift her head. Kaede smiles back at her kindly; there is no judgment in her eyes, only a gentle warmth.

THIRTY-TWO

by Dillas

Kaede drops her phone.

"Whoa there, maestro," calls Kaito from the kitchen. The smell of lasagna floats around the living room. "That's how we break screens around here."

She looks at the phone. A familiar face locks eyes with her from the screen. The staring contest continues until the light dims. Kaede finally blinks.

A hand brushes her shoulder, and she jumps. As she looks onto Maki, she finds herself unable to *stop* blinking as water fills them.

"Hey." Maki squeezes her shoulder. "What's wrong?"

Thirty-two.

Kaede steals a glance at the phone again, and Maki picks it up for her. She taps the screen and enters her own staring contest. The grip on Kaede's shoulder grows unbearable the more Maki reads.

All Kaede can do is place her hand over Maki's and squeeze to make her feel something in return because without it, Kaede believes she'd be numb.

Thirty-two.

Kaito carries out lasagna and places it on the coffee table. "Sheesh, how many times does a man gotta say dinner's ready? You'd think ladies would go nuts over a man that cooks—uh, what's going on?"

Maki treats Kaede's shoulder like an anchor. "You should sit down."

That grin drops as Kaito does as he's told. Kaito never stops smiling, but he did. He stopped. The man has no clue, and he already stopped.

Something about that makes it all too real for her, and her heart catches up as she gasps for air. It pounds against her chest, her throat, her ears to the point she almost misses Maki speaking it into existence.

"Gonta died today."

Thirty-two.

His eyebrows scrunch together. "What?"

Her hand shakes. She can't stop it from shaking. Kaede's shoulder can't anchor Maki anymore. Instead, she grabs both of their wrists. It fails to anchor anyone as Kaito continues to ask questions that Maki has no way of knowing, but she answers anyways.

Kaede misses all of it.

The beating in her ears switches from the *bum-bum, bum-bum, bum-bum* of her heart to a soft *tick, tick, tick*. She never counted seconds before, but she counts now.

Thirty-two.

Thirty-two years rattles in her brain over and over. Kaede is thirty-two years old. Still young despite the two digit number, but how insanely fast have the seconds flown since they all met at sixteen?

Tick, tick, tick.

"We're only thirty-two," she breaks through the noise.

Maki and Kaito freeze their conversation to wait on her. Kaede's always been a leader, but when it comes down to it, words were never her thing. Once upon a time she believed she communicated better through music until the day the music died.

Until the day *she* died.

She grasps her chest to remind herself to breathe. "We've known Gonta for sixteen years. Sixteen years ago, we lost him once."

"That wasn't real though," reminds Maki. "I finished that game, and we all came out on top."

"I know it wasn't real, but we still lived it. It still happened."

Thirty-two.

Tick, tick, tick.

Somehow, Kaito frowns more. "This is the second time we lost Gonta."

"We don't get a redo this time," agrees Kaede. "This is it for us, you know? We don't wake up on the other side. Gonta... he doesn't get to wake up and find out everything's fine. That's his finale right there."

Everyone falls silent as her words sink in. Kaito fights back tears as he grits his teeth. It's when Maki's blank expression crumples inward that Kaito cries. He pulls her close to hide her face and her

emotions to protect her from the real world. The other arm's reserved for Kaede, but she stays on her spot on the couch.

"I never spoke to him much when we woke up, you know." Kaede tears her eyes away from the other two. "I couldn't speak to anyone because I was so ashamed. It wasn't real, but it doesn't make what I did okay. I didn't know what to do. I figured... if there was forgiveness out there for me, it'll find me. If I search for it, I'll only dig my hole deeper."

"Kaede—"

"You two, Shuichi, and Rantaro are the only ones that reached out to me once everything settled down." Her vision blurs. "I haven't spoken to anyone else. I let my shame keep me from everyone else for *sixteen years*."

Thirty-two.

Tick, tick, tick.

"Now we're thirty-two years old. Gonta died, and I never said a word to him. I won't wake up tomorrow and find out everything's fake. This time, I really did that, and I can't take it back."

Kaito takes away her choice of isolation. He moves between the two women and wraps an arm around her. No warmth is found there.

"Kaede, life happens," says Kaito. "We get busy, and years pass. Eventually, we all learn to forgive on our own. You think I ever spoke to Kokichi after all of that shit? Hell no. For a long time, I held onto that hatred, and it grew and grew and grew until I didn't recognize myself. I even found myself blaming him for things he had no part of because I wanted everything bad in my life to be his fault so bad...

"But I looked in the mirror, and I found the real person I hated was me. I hated what *I* became in that game, and it hit me that we all face that same problem. We all became what we hated most of all, and we have to accept it. I'm not that guy anymore, which

means... Kokichi ain't either. Real tough pill to swallow, but I did it. I forgave him because seeing how hard it was to forgive myself, I knew he had to be fighting a tougher civil war. And, Kaede, I know you're fighting it too, but it's time to forgive yourself, okay?"

"How can I?!" Tears spill over finally. The wetness is the first real thing she feels in the last few minutes. "Gonta was such a light in this world. In the game and outside. He lived his life for those around him, and I—I couldn't even speak to him! He deserved so much better from me, but I—"

"All of that is exactly why we all need to forgive ourselves and each other." Her eyes puff up from the tears, but Maki puts on a strong front. "We can't keep this up. It's not what Gonta would've wanted."

"He'd message me every once in a while." Kaito sighs. "He'd ask how you two were doing. How I was. If we needed anything... he really did try to keep us together directly or indirectly."

Thirty-two.

Tick, tick, tick.

"We need to meet up," offers Kaede. "We need to get all of us in one place and air everything. Life's too short to keep going like this."

Kaito's smile returns. Small, but it's there. "There we go. Forgive ourselves and each other. For Gonta and ourselves."

Kaede takes her phone back from Maki and begins searching for everyone on social media.

Thirty-two years. She refuses to let another sixteen years go by without trying to heal and living her life to the fullest.

Monotube
Chirper
Dunkblr
Picstagram
MonoTube
TEAM DANGANRONPA HQ THRASHED
NOT FICTION
LIVE
#News #LiveNews #Danganronpa
Danganronpa studios takeover (NOT CLICKBAIT)

scars of my memories

by ToxicPineapple

Harukawa climbs out of the bathtub and stands in front of the bathroom mirror, lukewarm water dripping off her skin and soaking into the shower mat.

The air in the bathroom is warm and damp and foggy, clouding the mirror and obstructing her view of herself. Harukawa can just barely make out the red of her own eyes through the condensation. She lifts one wet hand and swipes it across the mirror, then stares at the pink burn scar that stretches from the bottom of her ribcage to the far end of her clavicle. It's an old scar—or at least Harukawa thinks so—but the skin is permanently enflamed, raised and bumpy beneath her fingertips.

Or it would be, if Harukawa was touching it. She isn't, at least right now. She touched all of her scars—the jagged brown scar across the side of her stomach, the puncture marks around her ankles, the faded white cuts that line the small of her back—in the shower, earlier, but currently, Harukawa isn't looking to touch. Just to see.

She stands in front of the mirror, staring, until goosebumps rise on her skin and all the lingering steam is blown away by the fans. Harukawa has always had difficulty pinpointing the source of her emotions (to her knowledge) but she doesn't think she's upset. Her chest continues to rise and fall in steady intervals and though she shivers occasionally, water continuing to drip off of her at an agonisingly slow pace, she doesn't shake. She simply continues to regard herself in the mirror.

It's difficult to judge how much time passes before there's a light rap on the door. Harukawa lifts her head, and Yumeno's voice calls, "Harumaki? Y'okay?"

She is. Or maybe she isn't. Harukawa frowns down at the scar on her collarbone once again.

"I don't know."

"...Want me to come in?"

Though Yumeno offers, Harukawa doesn't hear anything else from the other side of the door. It's something she's come to appreciate about the other woman since they left the *Ultimate Academy*—Yumeno might be annoying and lazy, difficult to poke into doing her share of the chores and even harder to get to take care of herself, but she respects Harukawa's boundaries. She always has. Saihara does too—or he tries, anyway, at times treating Harukawa like a porcelain dish that could shatter rather than a person—but he struggles with it. That isn't to say Harukawa doesn't appreciate that he tries. But she's glad that it's Yumeno at the door right now and not Saihara.

"I'm not wearing anything," Harukawa responds.

Yumeno pauses again, probably thinking about it, before saying, "That's okay," and Harukawa puffs out her cheeks, looking down at the counter.

She doesn't really mind either. If it was Saihara, she'd tell him to go away, but Yumeno... well, give or take a couple scars, Harukawa and Yumeno's bodies are the same.

"Fine then."

The door opens a second later, revealing Yumeno, her red hair tied out of her face and her lip set with worry, though she smiles when they make eye contact. Yumeno closes the door behind herself

with a click, and Harukawa lets out a breath, leaning against the bathroom sink and waiting.

Yumeno's eyes dart from the scar on Harukawa's collar to the ones on her arms, and then finally to the one that encircles her neck. She doesn't speak. Harukawa huffs, softly, and averts her gaze, puffing out her cheeks again.

"Hey."

"Hey," Yumeno echoes. Her own eyes dart to the side. "Sorry. You just..."

"Have a lot of scars," Harukawa finishes drily, "I know I do." She lifts her free arm, cooly examining one of the jagged scars that rests there. "I don't know where I got them."

A hum leaves Yumeno at that. She leans against the sink, too, and gazes up at the ceiling, fiddling with the drawstring on her sweatpants. "Me either, but I only have one scar like that. On my tummy. Shuichi said it's an appendix scar, but I don't remember getting my appendix taken out."

It sort of feels like apples to oranges; Yumeno doesn't remember receiving her scar, but at least she knows rationally where it *came* from, something that Harukawa will never have the luxury of. Yet she smiles, shaking her head, and looks up at the ceiling too. She drops her arm and rests her hand on her stomach, thumb brushing against the place where her own scar would be if she'd had an appendectomy like Yumeno.

"You got any guesses like that?" Yumeno asks. Harukawa isn't looking at her, but she can hear the lilting curiosity in Yumeno's voice, knows her well enough to be able to picture exactly the kind of expression Yumeno is making right now. The question makes Harukawa frown. She doesn't speak right away, pondering it, and Yumeno doesn't break the silence either. They listen to the drip of the shower tap while Harukawa thinks.

"Maybe. Nothing that specific." She sighs, lowering her gaze. "They could've given them to me. *Team Danganronpa*, I mean. I thought I got them from being an assassin. I wouldn't put it past them to scar my body to make things more realistic." Harukawa clicks her tongue. "Or maybe whoever I was before lived a dangerous enough life that she had the scars already."

Yumeno's head tilts to the side in the corner of Harukawa's vision. "Like... being in a gang or something?"

"Or something," Harukawa agrees. She looks down again, gazing at her burn scar, and this time she does reach up and touch it, fingers brushing against the jagged edges. "It... frustrates me that I'll never know. I don't like making guesses like this. That's more Shuichi's thing. I just want..." She trails off, her expression screwing up, but Yumeno's hand comes over and covers hers, small and soft and uncalloused, entirely unlike Harukawa's own.

"You know..." Yumeno hesitates. Harukawa finally looks back at her, watches her avert her gaze yet again, uncertainty flickering in her own red-brown eyes. "It's... okay to want to remember. Shuichi's always talking about how we're real people and who we were before doesn't matter, but... I think he just does that 'cause he knows a little bit about who he was before, and he doesn't want it to be true." Yumeno shrugs. "It sucks not knowing who you used t' be. I don't think there's anything wrong with hating it."

A quiet laugh bubbles out of Harukawa. She shakes her head. "I don't hate it. It's nothing that intense." She gazes down at their hands. There are scars on her own knuckles, none on Yumeno's. "It doesn't change things for me either way. It's not like I'm ever going to be that person again."

"It's frustrating though," Yumeno insists.

"Yeah," Harukawa admits. She exhales and closes her eyes, and while her eyes are closed, Yumeno's thumb massages circles into the back of her hand, a steady, repetitive motion that Harukawa

instinctively matches her breathing to. Eventually, she opens her eyes, and when she does, Yumeno is still looking at her, eyebrows raised, head tilted in the other direction now.

Harukawa can tell what Yumeno is going to ask.

"I'm fine," she dismisses. "I'm just... thinking."

To this, Yumeno doesn't reply; she just raises her eyebrows further and rolls her head back in the other direction. Though she doesn't speak, Harukawa knows what she's asking. Harukawa snorts, more at the gesture than much else, and then sighs, looking down at the bathroom tile.

After hesitating for another moment, Harukawa admits, "I'm just wondering... what Momota would have said about them."

"Your scars?"

"What else?" Harukawa can't help sounding just a little bit indignant. Yumeno pouts at her.

"I dunno! Maybe you changed subjects in your head. Not everyone thinks about the same thing for five minutes, you know." Yumeno retracts her hand and crosses her arms, lower lip jutting out, and Harukawa laughs, shaking her head.

"Yeah, my scars. Momota was always..." It's difficult to put a word to him nowadays. It's been so long since she's seen him. Harukawa has to rewatch old clips of their season of *Danganronpa* to even remember what his voice sounded like. "Nice. He was always nice. He wouldn't have judged me, right?"

Though Yumeno has no possible way of knowing, she shakes her head, puffing out her chest in that way she does when she's about to imitate Momota. "Of course not! No hero would judge something like *that*."

Harukawa chuckles. She ruffles Yumeno's hair, and while Yumeno

grumbles, fixing her ponytail, Harukawa looks down at the floor. "What if... I don't want it to be because he was a hero? What if I... want Momota to have accepted my scars because he accepted me?"

"Didn't he already accept you?" Yumeno frowns, the false bravado gone from her voice. "Always seemed like he did. He was trying to comfort you even right before he died."

A bitter taste enters Harukawa's mouth. She shakes her head. "I never knew how Momota really felt," she denies, "and I never will. Just like I'll never know where I got these damn scars." She presses her lips into a thin line, suddenly brimming with a hot emotion, the sort of thing that makes her want to punch the mirror until it shatters into thousands of tiny glass fragments. Instead, Harukawa makes a fist and stares down at her knuckles, wondering if it was that urge in the first place that got her these scars.

Yumeno doesn't speak right away. Harukawa knows she should say something, but she doesn't want to. She feels exhausted and groggy in the aftermath of her shower, and if it weren't for the scars all over her body, she'd be dressed and in bed by now, drifting to sleep under the galaxy-print comforter Saihara bought her for Christmas. It's idiotic to dwell on what she can't change. These scars, Momota, her memory—complaining isn't going to change the reality of any of them. But Harukawa can't help thinking about them, hurting for them, almost like even though Momota is dead he lives inside her chest even now.

"Me and Shuichi accept you," Yumeno offers. Harukawa knows that she shouldn't be surprised, but she can't help it; for what feels like the thousandth time, she meets Yumeno's red-brown eyes, brows knitted together. "Nnnn... don't make that face, like it's weird or something. You're our Harumaki... 'course we're not gonna judge you over some scars. You're still like... pretty, and stuff—and more important, you're still Maki. What difference does it make how many scars you have?"

"Weren't you just saying it's okay to be upset that I can't remember where they come from?" Harukawa raises an eyebrow.

Yumeno's cheeks puff out. "*Duh*. But it's not like *we* care. I only know one you, and it's the one standing in front of me." She shrugs. "That's the only one I wanna know."

After everything they've been through... the fact that it still surprises Harukawa to hear Yumeno say that is probably a bit pathetic, but it's rare to hear her speaking so frankly. Yumeno doesn't like to waste her breath. Though she started opening up after Chabashira died, it's not like she changed all at once. Harukawa knows it's hard for Yumeno to express those warmer sentiments—knows because it's exactly how *she* feels whenever she tries to communicate to Saihara and Yumeno how much they matter to her.

Harukawa knows... that Yumeno wouldn't say it unless she meant it.

"What if I don't accept myself?" Harukawa asks regardless, her voice faint. "I'll never know where these scars come from... I could have gotten them doing something horrible. How am I supposed to accept that?"

"Don't." Yumeno shrugs. "Accept the Harumaki that's here now. And even if you can't do that yet... that means me and Shuichi just gotta accept you even harder to make up for it." She smiles, a lazy little smirk, and meets Harukawa's gaze. "You'd do the same for me, right?"

Harukawa's heart skips a beat. She pulls a face and twigs Yumeno's nose, averting her gaze. "Don't ask stupid questions like that. Of course I would."

A giggle bubbles out of Yumeno. "I don't see the problem, then." That smirk is still in her voice. Harukawa knows if she meets it that she'll just get more embarrassed, so she crosses her arms, resolutely staring at the towel rack. This only makes Yumeno laugh again, but when she next speaks, her voice is serious. "Put some clothes on, okay? Shuichi wants to watch a movie tonight. He won't tell me what it is."

The indignation in Yumeno's voice brings a smile to Harukawa's face. She nods, and turns to watch as Yumeno walks out of the bathroom, drawing the door shut.

Before it closes fully, Harukawa calls, "Himiko."

"Mhm?"

"...Thank you."

A red-brown eye peeks back through the door, and Yumeno's small hand pokes through the crack, giving a thumbs up. She's gone a moment later, padded footsteps retreating, but Harukawa doesn't waste any time missing her, reaching for the clothes she set on the counter before she hopped in the shower. She doesn't want to keep Saihara and Yumeno waiting.

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